REMEMBERING HM3 BIENVENIDO DONA – FILIPINO PIONEER AND U.S. NAVY MEDICAL HERO OF VIETNAM

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On January 15, 1955, Bienvenido Dona enlisted in the U.S. Navy – one of the nearly 1,000 Filipino nationals to enlist that year.

At age 27, the Northern Mindanao native had been older than most recruits in-processing at the Naval Base Sangley Point, Cavite, Philippines. But like other newly minted sailors with a wanderlust, Dona would have told you it was a chance to "see the world."

The Navy of the 1950s offered limited prospects for Filipinos, and foreign nationals like Dona were still relegated to roles as mess stewards. Whether shipboard or ashore, stewards were typically engaged in the tedious tasks of cleaning, cooking, preparing meals, making beds, etc.

Dona was among the rare few able to break free from the rating – going from steward to striker and finally to Hospital Corps School in San Diego, California. After graduating from "A" School, Dona would have been among the first Filipino hospital corpsmen in the Navy.

Following a tour at Naval Hospital San Diego, Dona attended Field Medical Service School at Camp Pendleton, California. On May 19, 1965, he was assigned to the Headquarters & Service Company, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines (Rein) Fleet Marine Force (FMF) with orders to Vietnam.

As an FMF corpsman, Dona would have been the cherished "Doc" to his Marines – a first responder instilled with the knowledge to stop the bleeding, clear the airway, protect the wound, and treat and prevent shock. It would not be long before he put these lifesaving skills to use.

On Jan. 15, 1966, while on patrol near the village of Phu An, north of Saigon, Vietnam, Dona's platoon was hit by a "withering volume of small arms and automatic weapons fire." As others in his unit would later testify, Dona disregarded his own safety, running one hundred meters against a barrage of enemy fire to reach wounded Marines. Calmly and coolly, he administered first aid and evacuated the casualties to safety. Two days later, Dona would again be seen dashing through a hail of gunfire playing the role of lifesaver.

Tragically, Dona's life would be cut short on March 23, 1966. While taking part in a search-and-clear mission in a well-fortified village in the Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam, Dona was shot and killed in the final act of attending to a fallen Marine. He was 38 years old.

For his professional skill and unfaltering dedication to duty under duress, Dona would posthumously be awarded the Silver Star.

His body would later be brought by a fellow corpsman to his Filipino home of Cagayan de Oro City in Northern Mindanao and laid to rest in Lugait Municipal Cemetery.

Today, Bienvenido G. Dona's name is one of 645 hospital corpsmen and 57,939 servicemen enshrined on the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C.

Sources:

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